

Self-portrait of the writer as an ideal mother: Laura Morland as Angela Thirkell

Hazel K. Bell

Laura Morland, the best-selling novelist in Angela Thirkell's sequence of Barsestshire novels, is her longest-lasting character, and perhaps her best loved. Laura is the heroine of AT's first novel in the Barsestshire sequence (*High Rising*), after her previous autobiographies; perhaps combining autobiography here with fiction, drawing on personal experience to start a career in writing fiction. Laura's 70th birthday closes the Barsestshire sequence; her life and career span and even dominate the novels.

I feel that, in Laura Morland, Angela Thirkell was drawing on her own experience to present, in both her professional and her personal life, a self-portrait of the author and mother: but an idealized, perhaps somewhat rueful one.

First, compare the two writers, the fictional one and her creator. Laura always assesses her own works as "good bad books; the same every year; you can't tell them apart" — perhaps AT was ruefully aware that unkind critics might describe her own books in this derogatory way, and meant to beat them to the deprecation. Nevertheless, every single character in Barsestshire — of all its classes and types—who has read Morland's books, loves them fervently. She is the ultimate best-seller. This lack of literary pretension, allied with true, total popularity, may represent the state to which AT may have most aspired.

Laura is a scatty, inefficient writer, who cannot change her type-writer ribbon, losing much time and effort to the task ("It was one of the days when the typewriter exhibits original sin in some of its more striking forms." — *High Rising*). Similarly, she constantly muddles and casts spectacles and hairpins in an ecstasy of scattiness, well matched in Angela's prose style. Surely AT was similarly impractical, mistress only of the imaginative flow of the writing process, deploring its technical demands.

Laura's relationship with her secretary, Anne Todd, is one of personal friendship rather than business. Anne is "not a real full-time secretary, for she only came up for the mornings, but still, a secretary" (*High Rising*). Laura did not acquire her secretary by the sensible, business-like course of advertising for one or approaching an agency, but by sobbing in the presence of her friend over the pressure of her work. The friend reveals herself as an unsuspected expert in the field of Laura's books, a trained secretary, and in need of occupation. How very fortunate!

This personal, unbusiness-like secretarial relationship seems to resemble that revealed in AT's published letters to Margaret Bird, who typed her manuscripts. Here are some extracts from AT's letters to her:

I don't know how you do it all, with the Young Ladies and the Shop and a Husband; but when I come to think of it I was doing much the same, with a husband not earning anything and three boys

Your affairs must be much more complicated than mine, as all my earnings come from either H. Hamilton or Knopf. But even so I took to an accountant some years ago and found it saved my life (I cannot say my reason as I have not got any).

I do congratulate you on the long skirt and black top.

I have just had six million Income Tax papers and do not understand one word of them.

Many thanks for LOVELY cream ...

Laura's relations with her publisher, Adrian Coates, are likewise wholly affable but vague and quite unbusiness-like, lacking any grasp of the publishing process, its finances and promotion; while he, of course adores her. At lunch together, "Adrian plunged into an explanation of cheap editions, their advantages and disadvantages . . . the business in hand took some time to discuss, and it is doubtful whether Laura was much wiser at the end than at the beginning... Adrian liked to please the goose that laid his golden eggs."

Then, compare the two family lives. Laura, like AT (see first letter quoted above), is a mother of sons only, whom she brings up alone. "Oh, those first born, how they take it out of one's ignorance of their ways! . . . Darling Tony. The elder boys said she spoiled him." (*High Rising*). From Angela's elder boys' autobiographies, this certainly seems to hold autobiographical accuracy. Perhaps, in fact, Richard, the awful son of the Tebbens, who regards his mother "with disgust that she was wearing the raincoat which reminded him forcibly of the appearance of the wives of Heads of colleges at garden parties, and that her untidy bobbed hair was escaping in every direction from beneath a hat suitable for Guy Fawkes. That her face was irradiated with affection escaped his notice", then "abandoned himself to the deep despair of a young man who knows he is even ruder and more intolerant to his parents than they deserve" (*August folly*), is the closest AT can bring herself to a truthful portrayal of her relationship with her elder two boys.

Laura, too, writes and publishes from necessity to pay her sons' school fees, having no financial support from a father. "Most luckily, (Laura's first novel) suited the public taste, and so did the others, and Laura had educated Gerald and John, and got Dick into the Navy . . ." She regards her sons tenderly but shrewdly, and the family life, albeit single-parent, is idealized, as certainly is the picture of small-boyhood:

Oh, the exhaustingness of the healthy young! ... There lay her demon son, in abandoned repose. His cheeks, so cool and fun in the day, had turned to softest rose-petal jelly, and looked as if they might melt upon the pillow. His mouth was fit for poets to sing.

Everyone loves Laura, a great social success. This also must come under the heading of idealization rather than accurate representation of AT's recorded experience. (We do have a rather grim, perhaps sublimated social comment—"A woman who can't bring a man with her is apt to be, if not unwelcome, at least the sort of person who doesn't head one's list of guests." Manlessness, though, seems not to have been the reason for Angela Thirkell's own lack of social popularity.)

Ataste for widowhood

While Laura appears as an idealized writer and mother, however, she is not also an ideal wife; even AT could not present herself in such a disguise. A happy marriage would be too far both from her experience to draw on and from represented autobiographical truth; nor, I think, would she

wish to suggest that motherhood really must involve happy marriage. The other Barseshire heroine of later years who seems most admired by AT, and most likely to be a wistful self-portrait, is Lavinia Brandon in *The Brandons*. Both these ladies live with no man: there can be no divorce in happy, socially correct Barseshire, and as they both have children, there must, indeed, have been husbands. Therefore both are widows; but of a most unusual type in romantic fiction. Their memories of their departed husbands are vague, with a discernible sense of relief from a tiresome presence. Laura feels, "One man had been enough trouble to last her for a life-time". She comments, "Have you noticed how real widows go all crumpled up after their husbands die? ... I don't crumple a bit I suppose I haven't the real widow spirit Besides, it is so comfortable to live alone". Her departed husband is described by Mrs Knox as "just nul, nothing at all. How you lived with him is quite beyond me. A good-looking worth-nothing, nearly as stupid as poor George's wife". We have no evidence of folly or ill-doing on the part of Mr Morland deceased. Whom does AT actually intend to describe in these contemptuous terms?

Mrs Brandon:

explained her own (charming) appearance as the result of a long and happy widowhood, and as, after a little sincere grief at the loss of a husband to whom she had become quite accustomed, she had nothing of consequence to trouble her, it is probably that she was right (*The Brandons*).

She had been "only beginning to feel ruffled by her husband's dullness when death with kindly care removed him through the agency of pneumonia". — This is black comedy!

Here is a strange attitude to marriage in romantic fiction, which must surely stem from AT's own bitter experience of

the married state, regretted and resented so that even in her novels she could not represent the women who most resembled her as having even at one time been happy wives. These passages seem to echo a letter AT wrote to Margaret Bird:

When I think of what I did in Australia between 1920 and 1930 — with a husband who gradually became little less than a liability and three boys to feed, clothe and educate ... I often wonder why I am alive. ... I do really understand the position of the wife who finds herself being everything else as well.

The attitude of these widows to their dead men forms the one black, realistic, element in the self-portraiture of AT, in startling contrast to the otherwise romantic airs of Barseshire.

Laura refuses several offers of marriage through the books (for a character so popular and eligible these would have to be made), for no convincing reason, except, I suspect, that AT simply did not want to present marriage as a necessary ingredient for the successful life of an author and mother, nor to distort her self-portrait in such a way. Laura opts for husband-free, scatty independence, and is presented, like ideal Angela, as a perpetually productive, dearly loved and best-selling writer, socially successful and adored by all, loving mother —but no good wife.

Paper by Hazel K. Bell presented at the 'October Folly' of the Angela Thirkell Society held in Dublin, October 1991. It appeared in the *Journal of the Angela Thirkell Society* No. 13, 1993, pages 23-26.